

# NATIONAL CENTER ON ELDER ABUSE

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*Elder Abuse Information Series No. 1*

## Types of Elder Abuse in Domestic Settings<sup>1</sup>

### The Problem of Elder Abuse

Elder abuse in domestic settings -- i.e., in a person's own home, apartment or other non-institutional living arrangement -- is a serious problem, affecting hundreds of thousands of elderly people across the country. The problem is largely hidden under the shroud of family secrecy. The signs of elder abuse are not recognized, leading to gross under-reporting of the problem.

The true national incidence or prevalence of elder abuse is not known although various studies have attempted to estimate the size of the problem. In 1991, for example, researchers estimated that 2.5 million people were victims of various forms of elder abuse. This figure was adjusted in 1996, based on state reporting data, to suggest that there were between 820,000 and 1,860,000 abused elders in the country.<sup>2</sup> It is widely accepted that these data help to illuminate the seriousness of the problem; however, no one can say exactly how many cases of elder abuse there are in this country each year.

### Types of Elder Abuse

The National Center on Elder Abuse defines seven different types of elder abuse: physical abuse; sexual abuse; emotional abuse; financial exploitation; neglect; abandonment; and self-neglect. These definitions are based on an analysis of existing State and Federal definitions of elder abuse, neglect and exploitation conducted by the Center in 1995.

- **Physical abuse.** Use of physical force that may result in bodily injury, physical pain, or impairment.
- **Sexual Abuse.** Non-consensual sexual contact of any kind with an elderly person.
- **Emotional abuse.** Infliction of anguish, pain, or distress through verbal or non-verbal acts.
- **Financial/material exploitation.** Illegal or improper use of an elder's funds, property, or assets.
- **Neglect.** Refusal, or failure, to fulfill any part of a person's obligations or duties to an elderly person.

<sup>1</sup>This Informational report was researched and written by Toshio Tatara, Ph.D. and Lisa M. Kuzmeskus, M.A. for the National Center on Elder Abuse Grant No. 90-am-0660 (Washington, DC: May 1996; update by the National Center on Elder Abuse, March, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Tatara, Toshio and Lisa Kuzmeskus, *Summaries of Statistical Data on Elder Abuse in Domestic Settings for FY 95 and FY 96* (Washington, DC: National Center on Elder Abuse, 1997).

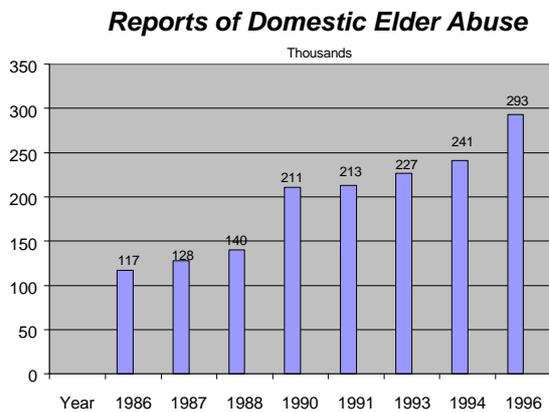
The National Center on Elder Abuse is a partnership of the National Association of State Units on Aging (NASUA); the Commission on Legal Problems of the Elderly of the American Bar Association (ABA); the Clearinghouse on Abuse and Neglect of the Elderly (CANE) of the University of Delaware; the San Francisco Consortium for Elder Abuse Prevention of the Goldman Institute on Aging (GIOA); the National Association of Adult Protective Services Administrators (NAAPSA); and the National Committee for the Prevention of Elder Abuse (NCPEA). Support for the National Center on Elder Abuse is provided by the U.S. Administration on Aging.

- **Abandonment.** Desertion of an elderly person by an individual who has physical custody of the elder or by a person who has assumed responsibility for providing care to the elder.
- **Self-neglect.** Behaviors of an elderly person that threaten the elder's health or safety.

## Highlights of A Study of Domestic Elder Abuse Reports

Presented below are selected findings from a national study of state domestic elder abuse reports, conducted by the National Center on Elder Abuse.<sup>2</sup> Data were collected from State adult protective service agencies and State units on aging. As noted above, many incidents are not reported; thus, these numbers may undercount the extent of the problem.

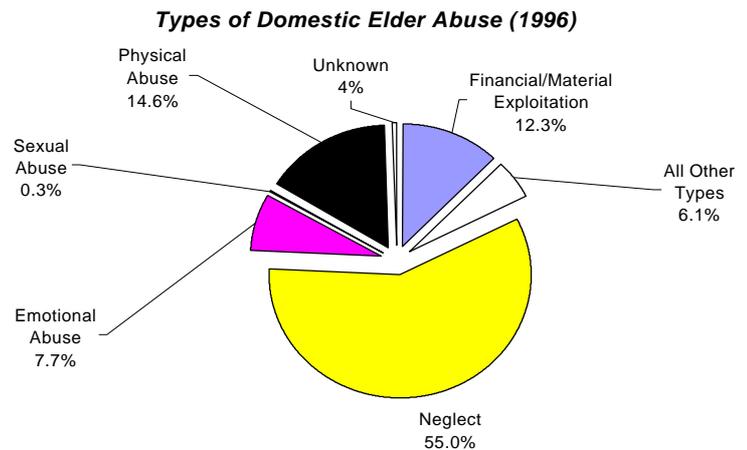
- From 1986 to 1996 there has been a steady increase in the reporting of domestic elder abuse nationwide: 117,000 reports in 1986; 128,000 reports in 1987; 140,000 reports in 1988; 211,000 reports in 1990; 213,000 reports in 1991; 227,000 reports in 1993; 241,000 reports in 1994; 286,000 in 1995 and 293,000 in 1996. The 1996 figure represents an increase of 150 percent since 1986.



- This study estimates that approximately 1.01 million elders were victims of various types of domestic elder abuse in 1996. This figure, however, excludes self-neglecting elders. If self-neglecting elders are added, the total number of elder abuse victims might be as high as 2.16 million individuals.

- The median age of elder abuse victims was 77.9 years, according to 1996 data that excluded self-neglecting elders. The median age of self-neglecting elders was 77.6 years in 1996.

- Neglect is the most common form of elder maltreatment in domestic settings. Of the *non-self-neglect* reports that were substantiated in 1996, 55 percent involved neglect. Physical abuse accounted for 14.6 percent in the same year, while financial or material exploitation represented 12.3 percent of the substantiated reports. In 1996, 66.4 percent of the victims of domestic elder abuse were white, while 18.7 percent were black. Hispanic elders accounted for 10 percent of the domestic elder abuse



victims in the same year. The proportions of

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Native Americans and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders were each less than 1 percent.